

Testimony of John R. Niemiec, Captain, Health Programs Officer,
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Representatives

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Mr. Chairman, my name is John Niemiec, and I am a Captain in the Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department. I appear before you today on behalf of my department, the Fairfax County Professional Fire Fighters and Paramedics-International Association of Fire Fighters Local 2068, and my colleagues from the Fairfax County Sheriff's Office.

I would like to thank Congressman Davis and the Committee for holding this important hearing today, and commend you for shining a spotlight on a public health issue that is of vital concern to the nation's fire fighters. I would also like to thank Mr. Jay Walker, the students from Robinson High School DECA, and especially Erika Stein, for their unselfish campaign in promoting Hepatitis C awareness and future legislation.

I am here today because Hepatitis C is a real concern for first responders. Because Hepatitis C is transmitted blood-to-blood, first responders face an increased risk of exposure to the virus. Hepatitis C can be a lethal virus that is five times more prevalent in the United States' population compared to the HIV virus and yet, the American people receive little information as it relates to the Hepatitis C virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that approximately 1 out of every 50 Americans is infected with the Hepatitis C virus.

Individuals who are Hepatitis C infected can be asymptomatic for 20-30 years. However, often by the time the disease is even diagnosed, the disease has already progressed to cirrhosis, liver cancer, end-stage liver disease, or the need for a liver transplant. In those cases, if it had been caught earlier there may have been a chance to slow the progression of the disease with behavioral changes, such as limiting alcohol consumption.

Currently, there is no vaccine for the Hepatitis C virus. Often individuals who were administered the Hepatitis A and/or Hepatitis B vaccinations believe they are protected against Hepatitis C.

This is not the case, and these misperceptions show that we need a better public education campaign about the disease. Because the virus consistently mutates, there are 6 genotypes and over 80 subtypes causing the manufacturing of vaccine for Hepatitis C to be problematic.

Typically, the treatment regime is for 6 - 12 months of injections and oral medications. While treatment has advanced over the last 10 years, more needs to be done. In about 50% of the patients, current treatments do not eliminate the disease. Also, treatment for

Hepatitis C can cause significant physical and mental side-effects, which means that patients receiving treatment may require additional support from medical providers and patient support groups to optimize their treatment outcomes.

As mentioned, first responders face an increased risk of exposure to the disease. Hepatitis C has not only infected but has also affected a number of first responders within the fire service and law enforcement arenas. Fairfax County Fire and Rescue has 10 fire fighters infected with the virus while the City of Philadelphia Fire Department has over 200 fire service personnel stricken by this disease. On a personal note, I have a younger sibling infected with the Hepatitis C virus.

The time to educate, prevent, and screen the “at-risk” population is now. Medical experts with knowledge about this virus continue to echo the urgent need to screen the “at-risk” populations such as first responders and individuals who had blood transfusions prior to 1992.

Therefore, I urge that all Congressional leaders embrace, promote, and fund The Hepatitis C Epidemic Control and Prevention Act not only for first responders but for the American people as well.

Thank you for your consideration. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.